News/Opinion

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The strategy still emphasizes force-on-force land warfare in which the casualty count is expected to be high.

To Halt an Enemy

By James Kitfield

IN the wake of a series of post–Cold War defense and strategy assessments—culminating in 1997 with DoD's Quadrennial Defense Review and the National Defense Panel report—clear-cut battle lines are drawn in the debate between airpower and land force proponents.

All agree that the stakes are high. The outcome will influence service budgets and multibillion dollar weapon programs and have a direct impact on the US ability to get the most out of cutting-edge technologies that some call a Revolution in Military Affairs.

The debate over the capabilities and proper roles of airpower and land forces will dictate how US forces fight future wars. Today, the national military strategy and Pentagon warfighting models reflect a Cold War emphasis on large, force-on-force engagements between land armies.

Airpower forces are cast in a supporting role, a fact that airpower experts consider a fatal flaw.

"Recent DoD assessments represent the most exhaustive look at these issues since 1948, and they clearly show that our warfighting models don't work and our national strategy is all screwed up," said Maj. Gen. Charles D. Link, who recently retired after serving as the special assistant to the Air Force Chief of Staff for the National Defense Review and the QDR. Link also led the Air Force team in both the Commission on Roles and Missions and Deep Attack Weapons Mix Study.

Link said DoD's strategy is that, in response to a large-scale aggression by enemy land forces, the US would deploy large Army and Marine Corps divisions to the war theater rapidly in anticipation of a decisive land counteroffensive. "That's a strategy for putting the largest possible number of Americans within range of enemy fire as quickly as we can," said Link, who added, "It solves the enemy's deep attack problem."

Link delivered these and similar remarks at several venues that took up the airpower vs. landpower debate around the capital in late fall.

The Eaker Institute put on a strategy, requirements, and forces colloquy on Oct. 31 at the National Press Club. It is the policy and research arm of AFA's Aerospace Education Foundation. Joining Link on the Eaker panel were retired Air Force Gens. Charles A. Horner, the coalition air boss in the 1991 Gulf War,

Strike camera footage from an F-117 with an Iraqi communications center in its crosshairs. Precision munitions increased the targets per sortie ratio.

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and Charles A. Boyd, former deputy commander in chief of US European Command.

Link and other active duty and retired military officers also argued the issue during a symposium at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and at a session of the Defense Writers Group in Washington.

Referring to the current DoD war plan, Link said, "That strategy construct concluded that the only answer to Saddam Hussein's thrust into Kuwait was to move six-and-a-half divisions to the theater rather than start killing his armor as soon as it crossed the border. That warfighting model also led Gen. [H. Norman] Schwarzkopf to order some 20,000 body bags for Allied forces in preparation for Desert Storm."

Link thought it was a step in the right direction that the QDR called for airpower to achieve a halt in the advance of enemy armored forces within 14 days of an aggression—a critical component of the Pentagon strategy to fight two Major Theater Wars nearly simultaneously. It has yet to be matched, however, with commensurate changes in resources, warfighting plans, or doctrine, he said.

Gulf War Lessons

The example of the Desert Storm campaign forms the crux of the argument that airpower should be given a more prominent, and to some extent independent, role in future warfighting scenarios. Instead of launching a synchronized ground/air counteroffensive as prescribed by the AirLand Battle Doctrine of the 1980s, Schwarzkopf led with a withering campaign of air bombardment that lasted for weeks and reduced many Republican Guard and other land divisions to less than 50 percent combat effectiveness.

The result was a rapid, 100-hour ground campaign marked by historically low friendly casualties.

Air Force officials said the air campaign revealed that a combination of advanced technologies, such as stealth, precision guided weapons, space-based surveillance and targeting, and advanced command-and-control systems had vastly increased the effectiveness of US airpower against massed armored forces, even when the latter were in dug-in positions. The improved reliability of modern aircraft also led to historically high sortie rates.

Even Horner, the air campaign commander, concedes he was taken aback by the combined effect of all those technological advances.

"I don't think any of us understood airpower going into the Gulf War," said Horner. "We hadn't had any real experience since Vietnam."

The Gulf War featured a steep learning curve. Horner noted that, at the beginning of the air campaign, planners assigned roughly an equal number of sorties and aim points. "But by the end of the war we were assigning two to four aim points per sortie with some aircraft, because we learned that one aircraft with precision munitions could service that many targets. So we were ignorant as airmen going into the Gulf War."

Airpower experts insist they have gone to school on the lessons of the Desert Storm air campaign. However, arguments for major changes in warfighting strategy and shifts in the service budgets to reflect the greater capability of airpower have met stiff resistance. The problem, say former Air Force insiders such as Link, is that such arguments run up against a Pentagon culture which values consensus and an emphasis on Joint operations above nearly all else.

"When a *soldier* talks about using airpower to support troops on the ground, he's applauded for his 'Jointness,' " said Link. "When a *sailor* talks about using Air Force tankers to extend the range of naval aircraft, he's lauded for his 'Jointness.'

"But when an *airman* talks about using airpower independently to kill the enemy instead of putting our troops in harm's way in the first place, he's being parochial and 'unjoint,' which is now viewed as a sin on the order of adultery."

Link went on, "It is difficult to advocate airpower without sounding parochial, but I believe that if we in the Air Force fail to do so, we're contributing to unnecessary American casualties in the future. That's immoral."

It's also unsound politically, Boyd said in his remarks to the Eaker forum. He noted that, in the early days of US involvement in Bosnia, American officials wanted airpower options that would minimize casualties on all sides.

"We were to find things [to attack] that would hurt no one and yet would, at the same time, cause the war to turn in its progress," said Boyd, who explained that this experience led him to deduce certain principles in the American way of war.

"There are three conditions, it seemed to me, that were important for Americans," said Boyd. "One is that the conflict ... had to become resolved very quickly. Two, that none of their sons and daughters get hurt. Three, that they didn't hurt anybody they weren't mad at."

He went on, "What we were dealing with in the Bosnia case was we wanted to make sure we didn't hurt anybody we weren't mad at—and we weren't mad at very many people. It made target selection a very, very difficult thing. How are you going to turn the course of the war without hurting anybody? Not only not getting any of your own people hurt, but then not hurting anybody that you are not mad at?"

Fundamental to the whole issue, said Boyd, is a single question: "How many casualties is this nation really willing to absorb? My own feeling is, very few, when our national security . not directly threatened. For the kind of feel-good diplomacy that we are increasingly involved in—humanitarian and upholding humanitarian law and so forth—the American people are not very interested in those kinds of conflicts in a national security sense, so I think their toleration of casualties is very, very low."

Target selection in Bosnia was difficult—defined by need for minimal casualties on all sides. Below, ground crew members ready an F-16 at Aviano AB, Italy.

Representatives of the other services, however, accuse the Air Force of overselling advances in military technology and preparing to fight the last war rather than focusing on the kinds of missions the military has confronted in recent years.

A case in point is Gen. Dennis J. Reimer, the Army Chief of Staff, who addressed the airpower issue in a Nov. 5 session of the Defense Writers Group in Washington. "If you

look at the number of missions the military has been given since 1989, you'll find the Army has conducted 60 to 70 percent of them, and that's with only 23 percent of [the defense budget]," the Army chief maintained. "Go back to the strategy as outlined in the QDR of *responding, shaping,* and *preparing*. The Army plays in all three of those, and particularly in shaping where you often have areas dominated by land armies—shaping means army-to-army relations and boots on the ground."

Landpower advocates said that, while airpower certainly played a decisive role in the Gulf War, it was a scenario tailor-made for the Air Force. They warn that airpower may prove less effective in combating "asymmetrical" threats of the future such as missile attacks, terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction, and guerrilla warfare.

One of these is retired Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Paul K. Van Riper, the former commander of Marine Corps Combat Development Command, speaking at the Center for Strategic and International Studies symposium. "If we're looking to repeat Desert Storm, then I have little problem with the Air Force argument," he told the CSIS audience, "but I believe the next threat will be asymmetrical. I know of no system that can detect and target 12 terrorists in a market, nor do I understand why all these high-tech surveillance systems we keep hearing about failed to find that A-10 aircraft for two weeks when it was lost in our own country."

He was referring to the recent Hamas terrorist bomb attacks in Israel and the April 2 crash high in the Colorado mountains of an A-10, flown by Capt. Craig Button.

"What we have are a lot of buzzwords floating around associated with the Revolution in Military Affairs, and if they weren't so dangerous they might be funny," said Van Riper. "With the possible exception of nuclear weapons, technology has never resulted in a fundamental change in how nations go to war. It's ludicrous to suggest that such concepts as 'information dominance' will now somehow make all the military doctrine that came before it irrelevant. We had information dominance in Somalia, but the information that mattered was the culture of that warlord's tribe."

Budget Battles

Nowhere has the battle between airpower and land force proponents been fought more fiercely than in the budget arena. Given the internal political dynamic of the Pentagon—that is, the need to build a consensus even for incremental change within the world's most massive bureaucracy—Defense Department leaders have generally spread the pain of the post–Cold War drawdown equally, cutting each service by roughly a third since 1989.

Given fundamental changes in technology and in the comparative value of different forces in the US military, though, airpower proponents clearly chafe at this "cookie-cutter" approach. Since 1989, for instance, the US military has largely transitioned from a force forward deployed on the periphery of the former Soviet Union to one that is increasingly based in the United States. Such an evolution would seem to play to Air Force strengths in power projection, rapid reaction, and precision strike.

"I don't believe 'Jointness' means simply spreading cuts equally among the three services," said Brig. Gen. Charles F. Wald, special assistant to the Air Force Chief of Staff for the National Defense Review, speaking at the CSIS symposium. "That may seem like fairness to some people, but people in leadership positions need to make decisions based on capabilities and not just on service orientation."

Because advances in technology hold out the promise that airpower can thwart and halt armored forces largely independent of other forces—a critical component of the Pentagon's strategy of fighting two Major Theater Wars nearly simultaneously—Air Force officials also assumed their fortunes would rise on the RMA's technological tide.

Apparently, that's not true. Horner, former CINC of US Space Command, believes the Defense Department is squandering a historic opportunity to press US technological advantages. "If there are two areas where our military capability ought to be growing, it's in airpower and spacepower, but they are constrained by these budget fights," said Horner, speaking at the Baker Institute symposium.

"All of the services are focusing a lot of attention on information warfare and cyberspace, but the Air Force is uniquely capable of exploiting those realms because of the speed and lethality of modern air weapons. So the fundamental problem is not where the Air Force should go but how do you break away from this concept that our national wealth has to be distributed equally among the services, no matter what."

Though each of the post–Cold War defense reviews has prompted behind-the-scenes service grumbling, frustrations have bubbled to the surface to an unusual degree in the wake of the release of the QDR in May. Rather than benefiting from a high-tech focus and power-projection capabilities, officials said, the Air Force was a target of disproportionate cuts.

As a result of the QDR, for instance, the Air Force faced the largest active duty personnel cuts (26,900 vs. 15,000 for the Army and 18,000 for the Navy) and sacrificed an active duty fighter wing (transferred to the reserves), a major building block of Air Force force structure. Favored weapons programs were also hit hard. The B-2 bomber program was capped at 21 aircraft, and the F-22 fighter program reduced from 438 to 339 aircraft. Perhaps most surprisingly, the Joint STARS surveillance aircraft program—a cutting-edge technology closely associated with the emphasis on information warfare—was cut from 19 to 13 planned aircraft.

Air Force officials maintain they financed their share of the Joint STARS program, but money was pulled by the Army. "All of these decisions are driven by the budget and competition for money," said Wald at the CSIS symposium. "But I can tell you that the Air Force is a

USAF took hits in personnel and weapons programs via the QDR. Example: Buy of the stealthy F-22 dropped from 438 to 339.

firm believer in Joint STARS, and we fully funded the program. Someone else pulled funding for those four aircraft."

The Halt Phase

Service quarrels over weapons programs and budgets are hardly headline news inside the Washington beltway. Far more serious, however, are claims by airpower proponents that American military strategy and the warfighting models which support it are fundamentally flawed.

Part of the problem, they say, are warfighting models and simulations that fail to take into account increased capabilities of modern airpower. When Link studied the assumptions of the "Tacwar" simulation which played heavily in both the Bottom-Up Review and Deep Attack Weapons Mix Study, for instance, he found that the model estimated the effectiveness of air sorties at 15 percent, less than what the Air Force experienced years ago in the Vietnam War.

According to the model's calculations, it took 16 air sorties to destroy a single armored personnel carrier.

"Tacwar is a pretty good surface warfare model, but it fails to get at the relative contribution of air and sea forces," said Link. "Thus decision makers in the Pentagon and commanders in chief in the field are using the wrong model to influence resource allocation and validate warfighting plans."

Partially in recognition of the increased capability of modern airpower demonstrated during the Gulf War, however, the QDR for the first time calls on air forces to begin destroying massed enemy forces on the first day they cross into friendly territory and to achieve a halt of the offensive within 14 days. That capability is critical to the Pentagon's stated ability of fighting and winning two Major Theater Wars nearly simultaneously.

As airpower is achieving total air superiority and a halt in the enemy's advance, however, Pentagon war plans still prescribe a synchronized buildup of ground forces in anticipation of a decisive ground counteroffensive.

"War plans still assume that after we achieve a halt phase, the Air Force goes off and plays volleyball during the buildup phase," said Link. "I would maintain that from that point on, the enemy's strategic options decline. He is either leaving for home or dying in place, and a follow-on counteroffensive may not be necessary. A ground war becomes an option rather than an inevitability. The point is, our long-term preoccupation with land forces has skewed this debate, and left unchanged it will lead to unnecessary casualties or military failures in a future conflict."

Landpower proponents counter that such a scenario risks prolonging a conflict before the decisive blow is delivered by US forces and flies in the face of successful campaigns throughout history.

"I agree that you halt an enemy with whatever means you have," said Reimer, the Army chief, "but this idea that airpower will win the war is historically suspect. You need to quickly synchronize your forces, get your force on the ground, and take advantage of what each service brings to the fight, and then go after the enemy and wrap things up as quick as you can. I think that's what the American people expect."

The Battle of Khafji

That thinking may well be outmoded. Airpower experts point to the little-noted battle of Khafji during the Gulf War as a real-world example of the disproportionate role airpower can play in a "halt phase" scenario.

Hoping to jump-start the ground war and initiate bloodletting of coalition forces in late January 1991, Saddam Hussein launched a three-division assault into Saudi Arabia. Alerted to the ground action by the Air Force's E-8 Joint STARS aircraft, the air component commander began attacking the armored columns from the air as they moved south.

"By the time those three divisions and 40,000 troops crossed the Saudi border," recalled Horner, they had been so devastated that "they were defeated by 5,000 Marine Corps and Saudi National Guard troops. Because it demonstrated what airpower can do to an attacking armored force in a halt phase scenario, I believe Khafji, though largely overlooked, was the single most important land battle of Desert Storm."

Some Army and Marine Corps leaders concede that war simulations and plans do not yet adequately reflect the decisive impact of stealth technology, precision weapons, satellite reconnaissance, and other accoutrements of modern airpower. Even so, they deride what one Marine general referred to as the Air Force's vision of "immaculate warfare." They sense a disconnect between it and the reality of combat through the ages.

"A major competitor in the future will not try and match the United States military—system for system," said Maj. Gen. Robert H. Scales Jr., a doctrinal expert and commandant of the Army War College, at the CSIS symposium. "Instead he will use his own advantages, and the No. 1 enemy advantage will most likely be the collective psyche and will of his people.

"As the Germans found out in the Battle of Britain, trying to destroy enemy will through bombardment can sometimes steel that will."

Scales said he could still recall lending fire support to American paratroopers trying to take a hill in Vietnam. "Every day I watched as aircraft dropped hundreds of bombs on top of that hill, and every night the North Vietnamese cooking fires would come on," he said.

Airpower and land force proponents continue to debate whether recent technological advances represent a paradigm shift in the effectiveness of airpower, or evolutionary change that little alters the fundamental nature of warfare. Absent a cathartic national crisis, however, even some airpower proponents warn against expecting a seismic shift in thinking inside an institution as conservative as the Pentagon.

"Resistance to radical change is a natural human condition, and I don't expect an institution such as the Defense Department to reform its thinking in a meaningful way absent a catastrophic failure or some threat to its existence," said Boyd, speaking at the Eaker forum. "Yet it's worth noting that decisions we make about our military forces today will affect their ability to respond to a crisis 20 years from now, when there may be a danger of catastrophic failure." ■